

AGAINST the DAY

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Protectors of the Future, Not Protestors of the Past:
Indigenous Pacific Activism and Mauna a Wākea

We are trying to get people back to the right timescale, so that they can understand how they are connected and what is to come . . . we are operating on geological and genealogical time. . . . The future is a realm we have inhabited for thousands of years.

—Bryan Kamaoli Kuwada, “We Live in the Future. Come Join Us”

On April 2, 2015, thirty-one *aloha ʻāina* (people who love the land; patriots) were arrested for “trespassing” on government property and “obstructing” the road upon which construction vehicles were attempting to ascend Mauna a Wākea—commonly known as Mauna Kea, the highest mountain in the Hawaiian islands and a sacred *piko* (umbilicus; convergence) for the *lāhui Hawaiʻi* (Native Hawaiian people/nation).¹ The next day, Hawaiian activist-blogger Bryan Kamaoli Kuwada (2015) rejected the copious dismissals of these Kānaka Maoli and our allies as “relics of the past.” To be sure, it is a tired colonial trope, representing Indigenous peoples as mere vestiges of a quickly fading and increasingly irrelevant past. But this settler colonial strategy of expropriation and normalization rears its head regularly against Indigenous communities and movements who insist on protecting ancestral connections to lands and waters.

Kuwada instead claimed the future as a realm with which Indigenous people are familiar and highly capable of traversing. His call to “come join us” invited all readers to cast off short-sighted and exploitative notions of prog-

ress that blind us to the inextricable connections between human and planetary health. Indigenous futurities seek to transform settler colonialisms for all who are caught within such relations of violence and exclusion.² Eve Tuck and Ruben Gaztambide-Fernandez (2013: 80) posit that whereas *settler futurity* requires the containment, removal, and eradication of original, autochthonous peoples, *Indigenous futurity* “does not foreclose the inhabitation of Indigenous land by non-Indigenous peoples, but does foreclose settler colonialism and settler epistemologies. . . . Indigenous futurity does not require the erasure of now-settlers in the ways that settler futurity requires of Indigenous peoples.” In the context of the Mauna Kea struggle, Kuwada (2015) put it this way: “Whenever we resist or insist in the face of the depredations of developers, corporate predators, government officials, university administrators, or even the general public, we are trying to protect our relationships to our ancestors, our language, our culture, and our ‘āina. But at the same time, we are trying to reawaken and protect their connections as well.”

In this essay, I follow in Kuwada's line of thinking, exploring ways Native Pacific activists enact Indigenous futurities and open space to transform present settler colonial conditions. In particular, I highlight the “Protect Mauna a Wākea” movement as a field of such openings. In this movement Kānaka Maoli and settler allies work together to unmake relations of settler colonialism and imperialism, protecting Indigenous relationships between human and nonhumans through direct action and compassionate engagement with settler-state law enforcement. As Kuwada indicates, this kind of futures-creation is not only in the interest of Indigenous people. Indigenous resistance against industrial projects that destroy or pollute our territories concerns the health of all people.

And yet we should not forget that the violences of exploitative and nonreciprocal practices of imperialisms and settler colonialisms have inflicted harms unevenly throughout Oceania.³ Struggles against such ecological and social injustice take on an intensified urgency in a time of increasingly rapid global climate change. In 2013, leaders of the Pacific Islands Forum declared, in no uncertain terms, that climate change is “the greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and well-being of the peoples of the Pacific” (Pacific Islands Forum, 2013). Islanders on low-lying atolls are literally losing their ancestral homelands to the encroaching tides. In the high islands of the Pacific, like my own archipelago, sea-level rise may be less pronounced but increasing heat, changing precipitation patterns, and

diminished natural resources are all posing new threats to cultural practices and material survival, especially for those who are more dependent on land- and ocean-based subsistence economies. Throughout Oceania, our waters are severely overfished, choked with pollutants, and stressed by ocean acidification. The need for transforming settler enclosures, extractivism, and consumerism could not be more clear.

In October 2014, just six months before the arrests on Mauna Kea, thirty-one Pacific Islanders blocked an important waterway and node in the regional economy—Newcastle Harbor, which serves as the largest coal-shipping port in Australia. The network of islanders from fifteen different Pacific Island nations included representation from islands, like Tuvalu, facing immediate inundation of their homelands by rising tides. And yet their rallying cry was not one of victimhood: “We are not drowning. We are fighting!” Known as the Pacific Climate Warriors, they toured Australia and joined together with settler allies to pose a direct challenge to Pacific Rim countries’ extractive and commodifying practices in the form of a flotilla blockade of the harbor. They put producers on notice: “The coal which leaves this port has a direct impact on our culture and our islands. It is clear to us that this is the kind of action which we must take in order to survive. Climate change is an issue which affects everyone and coal companies may expect further actions like this in future” (Queally 2014).

Like the activists on Mauna a Wākea, the Pacific Climate Warriors not only underscored the ways that imperialist industrial projects harm Indigenous Pacific cultures, but they also drew upon those very cultural practices of renewing connections with lands and waters in order to engage in direct action struggle. Long before the confrontation at Newcastle in 2014, young activists had been learning skills of canoe building from their respective elders. Once these canoes were built, the vessels were paddled into Newcastle and joined by Australian settler allies on kayaks to stop several ships and engage police boats. Restoration of ancestral knowledges continues to be an important part of enacting alternatives to settler colonial, capitalist enclosures. When colonial discourses frame blockades at Newcastle or on Mauna a Wākea as obstructions on a march to “*the future*,” they miss the ways this kind of activism is actually protecting the possibilities of multiple futures. The assertion of Indigenous epistemologies and practices renews intergenerational pathways connecting watery bodies—human, lake, harbor—and linking ancestors with descendants.

Opening Settler Colonial Enclosures

In many ways the indigenous person's most powerful weapon against further destruction and exploitation is simply *staying*. When the ultimate goal of colonization is to remove 'ōiwi [Natives] from our land in order to access and suck dry the material and marketable resources our ancestors have maintained for generations, it follows that the stubborn, steadfast refusal to leave is essential to our continued existence.

—Kahikina De Silva, "Ka'ala, Molale I ka Mālie: The Staying Power of Love and Poetry"

In Hawai'i, as in many other settler colonial contexts, both Indigenous people and settlers are here to stay. There will be no mass exodus of non-Natives from the islands, and although more and more Kanaka Maoli find it necessary to move away from Hawai'i, many stubbornly remain in the islands as well. But the problems are not as simple as the fact that Indigenous and settler peoples occupy the same lands and that both typically insist on staying. Our relations with lands and with each other are structured by dominant property regimes that cannot deal with the complexity of our layered and interconnected yet differential interests in the lands on which we reside.

Within settler state government policies and dominant visions of settler futurity, the prevailing models for how to deal with this standoff are inadequate:

- (1) The *allotment* or *assimilation model* aims for a complete enclosure in which the private property system is assumed to be total and Indigenous nations are fragmented as individuals, forever "integrated" or disappeared into settler society;
- (2) the *reservations model* sets aside pockets of land that may be held for the collective benefit of an Indigenous people and polity, while the underlying title often remains with the settler state and while settler society flourishes by commanding the lion's share of lands and resources; and
- (3) the *corporate model* refigures Indigenous nations as private corporate entities that own property and/or development rights that can be capitalized for profit within a globalized capitalist economy.⁴

Thus, if settler colonial relations are built on the enclosure of land as property that can then be alienated from Indigenous peoples, as well as demarcated to privilege certain racialized, classed, and gendered groups of settlers, then we need different ways of relating to land. As Tuck and Yang (2012: 7) argue,

decolonization in settler colonial contexts “must involve the repatriation of land simultaneous to the recognition of how land and relations to land have always already been differently understood and enacted.” To transform settler colonial relations, we need to do more than transfer ownership. We need to fundamentally shift the system that structures our relations to land.⁵ As Candace Fujikane (2015: 9) has pointed out, settler colonial strategies of enclosure try to delink land from water and to cordon off discrete sacred sites from the larger fields of relationality that gives them meaning. She writes,

Under the conditions of a settler colonial capitalist economy . . . in a system premised on the logic of subdivision, the state and developers draw red boundary lines around isolated “parcels” of land to fragment wahi pana (celebrated places) and wahi kapu (sacred places) into smaller and smaller isolated, abstracted spaces that have no continuities and thus, they claim, “no cultural significance.” This is how wastelands are produced as a part of the ongoing process of land seizure in Hawai‘i.

To borrow Fujikane’s phrase, Indigenous relations to and conceptions of land shatter such “fragile fictions” and settler logics.⁶

Protectors, Not Protestors

The same month that the Pacific Climate Warriors blocked Newcastle Harbor in Australia, the young Kānaka who would later become the most visible in the direct actions on Mauna Kea intervened in the groundbreaking of the Thirty-Meter Telescope (TMT). If built, the TMT would be the largest building on Hawai‘i island (popularly called the “Big Island”), eighteen stories high and occupying over five acres of land near the summit.⁷ For many years, a hui (group) of Kānaka have been working to assert and protect their genealogical connections to elements and deities of the mountain against an expanding footprint of astronomical observatories and telescopes (Casumbal-Salazar 2014). Those earlier battles were often fought in the courts (Puhi-pau and Lander 2005). But the disruption of the TMT groundbreaking ceremony and subsequent direct action tactics on Mauna a Wākea brought international attention to these protracted struggles.

The ways the self-described “*protectors*, not protestors” or *kia‘i mauna* (guardians of the mountain) conducted the struggle has much to teach us in terms of this essay’s central question of how to transform settler colonial relations with land. There were three levels at which protectors challenged the settler state’s legitimacy over the permitting of the TMT construction: in Indigenous terms, in national terms and in settler state terms.

Protectors of Mauna a Wākea—the mountain of Wākea—see the mauna, first and foremost, as an ancestor and a home of deities (Maly and Maly 2005). It is the highest point in Oceania. Measured from its base under the ocean to the tip of the summit, Mauna a Wākea is the tallest mountain in the world. It rises above 40 percent of the earth's atmosphere. Kanaka Maoli recognize the mauna as home to numerous akua (gods). As protector, Mehana Kihoi pointed out a few weeks in to her occupation on the mauna “all of the deities on this mauna are wāhine, and they all are water forms” (Mo'olelo Aloha 'Āina 2015). Mauna Kea's sacredness has to do not only with its remoteness from the realm of regular human activity but also with its significance in collecting the waters that sustain life. The summit is contained within a large land district, or ahupua'a, named Ka'ōhe. Dr. Pualani Kanaka'ole Kanahele (2015) explains: “In giving the ahupua'a the name of Ka'ōhe . . . the 'ōhe is the product that gathers water in itself. If we live in a bamboo forest, there's always water in the bamboo. This same idea was given to this particular land because the water gathers in this land. . . . It is the 'ōhe. It is the place that we will find water, always.” Hawaiian efforts to stop construction on the summit have been rooted in the ceremonial honoring of the various elemental forms of *akua* who reside on the mountain and thus give continued life through a healthy water supply. Protectors point out the ways the TMT would impact that water and thus human health.

Protectors have also drawn upon at least two legal regimes in their defense of the mauna: Hawaiian Kingdom law and settler state of Hawai'i law. The sacred summit is part of the corpus of lands that were illegally seized from the Hawaiian Kingdom in 1893, when a small group of sugar planters usurped power with backing from the US military. The Hawaiian Kingdom Crown and Government lands—together known as the Hawaiian national lands—remain under control of what protectors on the mauna continue to assert are illegally seized lands, over which the United States and State of Hawai'i have no rightful jurisdiction. Thus, on Hawaiian national terms, protectors assert their rights to challenge construction projects permitted by an illegitimate settler government. But protectors have also worked within settler state legal regimes to halt construction, using the settler state's own laws to challenge the construction of a large complex of buildings on lands that the state itself has zoned for conservation. As of this writing, the TMT project was officially put on pause when a state court found that the Board of Land and Natural Resources violated its own rules in issuing the permit and that petitioners against the TMT had not given due process when the conservation district use permit was issued for the project.

In addition to these layered ways of thinking about land and challenging the TMT, protectors further help us to think about ways to transform settler colonial land tenure through the ways they conducted what observers would describe as a blockade of the roadway to the summit and construction site. But the term *blockade* suggests a hard line, a line of exclusion, and what the protectors created was a space of engagement and an opening to “come join us.”

Prior to and following the April 2, 2015, arrests of those who used their bodies as barriers against the heavy machinery on its way to the summit, protectors established an “Aloha Checkpoint” for engaging police forces, tourists, construction workers, and others. The Aloha Checkpoint differed from a typical blockade in that protectors were not seeking to establish a border that would exclude anyone besides themselves. This was not a possessive, jurisdictional line. The checkpoint served as a porous boundary that was only intended to block construction vehicles. Furthermore, protectors used the checkpoint as a place to invite opponents and unknowing visitors to talk story. Whether passersby remained in their vehicles or got out to join occupiers in the makeshift tents that served as a kitchen and gathering area, protectors created a space for dialogue and an opportunity to engage in discussion about the ways the TMT project would impact at least five acres of the summit, with its various sites of worship, observation, and hiding places for the bones and umbilical cords of generations of some Hawaiian families. So many supporters donated food during the months-long stand on the mauna that the Aloha Checkpoint also unintentionally became a sort of “soup kitchen.” At least one Kanaka relayed that he would pick up houseless people in Hilo and drive them up to the mauna so that hungry folks could eat while also learning about the struggle (Kalaniākea Wilson, pers. comm., April 12, 2016). While the checkpoint was intended to keep construction vehicles out, it was not intended to keep those who operated them off the mountain. Construction workers and police officers, many of whom were also Native Hawaiians, learned through the engagements and in some cases brought their families back up to the mauna when they were off duty, with the intention of learning more and sharing aloha and dialogue with the protectors.

A *kapu aloha*—a philosophy and practice of nonviolent engagement—guided the Aloha Checkpoint and the associated activism on the mauna. Movement leader, *kumu hula* (master hula teacher), and *kia'i mauna*, Pua Case describes this *kapu* as grounded in the teachings of *kūpuna* (elders), and she emphasizes the way the *kapu* calls one to carry oneself with the highest level of compassion for ‘āina and for all people one may encounter (Maly and Maly 2005). The *kapu aloha* requires the discipline of empathy, even and especially for those with whom one may disagree. It is not a command to compromise with or assent to harm. The *kapu aloha* is not intended

as a release valve that makes it possible for people to continue enduring intolerable conditions, or to look away from wrongdoing. Speaking to a crowd gathered on the mauna during the occupation, Lanakila Mangauil (2015)—the young leader who disrupted the TMT groundbreaking ceremony in October 2014—expressed that the kapu aloha was particularly important in guiding behavior in a sacred place such as the mountain summit in the wao akua. Such an environment, he explained, reminds people to speak and act with focus, courage, and the deepest respect, even to those who ascend the mountain “on the machines that would rip up our sacred place. We speak to them with the utmost respect and aloha and compassion” (Mele ma ka Mauna 2015). The kapu aloha is a directive to try to understand the circumstances that bring one’s opponent to the moment of confrontation.

This kind of aloha manifested, for instance, in protectors greeting law enforcement officials who had come to remove them from the mountain with *lei lāʻī* (garlands of made from ti-leaf, known for its protective and healing qualities) and explicit statements recognizing their interrelatedness. Photographic and video images of law enforcement officers exchanging *hā* (breath), nose-to-nose and forehead-to-forehead with protectors circulated virally through social media channels, underscoring the ways that even when settler colonial relations pit Kanaka against Kanaka, we recognize one another (see figure 1). In many ways, the Aloha Checkpoint and the kapu aloha that ruled it changed the terms of political engagement. Protectors sought not to exclude but to powerfully remind opponents of the ways that the mountain is shared and the ways the mountain connects all in its shadow. While settler state officials cast the *kiaʻi* as impediments on the road to “progress” (aka settler futurity) and passed regulations that would be used to specifically target and remove protectors from the mauna, *kiaʻi* stewarded places and practices that invited their antagonists to join them in reaching toward more expansive and sustainable futures.

Kū Kiaʻi Mauna

When you see the possibility of “progress” in this more connected way, you see that we are actually the ones looking to the future. We are trying to get people back to the right timescale, so that they can understand how they are connected and what is to come.

—Bryan Kamaoli Kuwada, “We Live in the Future. Come Join Us”

While Indigenous environmental activism is still often dismissed by the very powers who benefit from exploitative usage of our lands and waters by



Figure 1. The first arrests began on Mauna a Wākea on April 2, 2015, days after the standoff had begun when construction vehicles began ascending the mountain. Photo by David Corrigan, Big Island News

(mis)representing us as fixed in place, pinned in a remote time, we continue to be concerned with the deep time of human survival. As Auntie Pua Case once said, when she guided my *hālau hula* (hula school) up to Kūkahau‘ūla and Waiau a few years before the highly publicized struggle over the TMT erupted: we know that the Mauna could shake her shoulders and throw these telescopes off. We don’t fight for the life of the Mauna, for the Mauna will live far beyond us; we are grateful to celebrate our connection to the Mauna in this way, to remember that we are the Mauna. And so protectors remember and renew connections, inviting others to come join us. Resurgent Indigenous futures beckon.

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Notes

- 1 In his essay on the genealogical connections between the mountain and the Native Hawaiian people, Leon No’eau Peralto (2014) explains: “Born of the union between Papahānaumoku and Wākea, Mauna a Wākea is an elder sibling of Hāloa, the first ali‘i.

As such, both the Mauna and Kanaka are instilled, at birth, with particular kuleana to each other. This relationship is reciprocal, and its sanctity requires continual maintenance in order to remain pono, or balanced" (234).

- 2 *Futurity* refers to the ways groups come to imagine or know about the future(s). Drawing on the work of Benedict Anderson, geographer Andrew Baldwin (2012) argues that certain logics and practices for anticipating and preempting particular futures bolster whiteness. Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernandez (2013) extend Baldwin's usage of this term in order to differentiate between settler and Indigenous futurities, where the former bolsters and extends settler colonial relations of power while the latter challenges them.
- 3 See Johnston and Barker 2008; Barker 2012; Teaiwa 2014; Goodyear-Ka'ōpua et al., 2014.
- 4 A fourth, less common, model is a leftist *settler commons model*, which envisions a complete shift to a communal form of land tenure in which all people—without distinction between Indigenous and settler—gain access to all lands before or without simultaneously dismantling settler colonialism. For instance, one such vision in Hawai'i proposes a settler reclamation of the commons from the last remaining Native Hawaiian-controlled landed trusts. Such a transition that fails to take into account the differential positionalities with respect to historically rooted systems of wealth and power in the islands would heighten existing inequalities, in which Native Hawaiians have been dispossessed of lands and remain at the bottom of various indicators of social, economic, and physical well-being.
- 5 As a way to unsettle settler regimes of land tenure, I look to Native Hawaiian understandings and practices of *kuleana* (authority, responsibility, privilege), particularly in relation to land and learning.
- 6 The phrase "fragile fictions" comes from Fujikane's forthcoming book, *Mapping Abundance: Indigenous and Critical Settler Cartographies in Hawai'i*, which will include some of her analysis on critical settler cartography and Indigenous cartography on Mauna a Wākea.
- 7 The final environmental impact statement of the TMT project acknowledges that the cumulative impacts of all the existing telescopes and related infrastructure on Mauna Kea have already been "substantial, significant, and adverse" on biological habitats. They rationalize the project by saying that further development would add only "incremental impact," thus keeping the level of harm at a continued level that is "substantial, significant, and adverse" (University of Hawai'i at Hilo 2010: S-8).
- 8 *Wahine* refers to women, the feminine, or female elements. See Mo'olelo Aloha 'Āina 2015 for Mehana Kihoi's explanation.

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